

THE LIFE OF JOE PERKIN – ARRANGER OF “PRATTY FLOWERS”, THE HOLMFIRTH ANTHEM

Joe Perkin is well known for his arrangement of the song “Pratty Flowers” but little is generally known of his personal and family life.

According to the census returns of 1851 and 1861 he was born in Honley in 1809. His father was Eli Perkin, a clothier and his grandfather, William, was a school-teacher.

An article in the local newspapers in the 1930s states that Joe's musical talent was recognised at an early age and he became tenor soloist at Carlisle Cathedral for three years. However, the Ahier Chronicles report that Joe had been principal tenor singer at St Paul's Cathedral. Whichever of these prestigious posts he filled he apparently became homesick and returned to the Holme Valley to live in Cliffe. He worked as a wool sorter for Robert Ramsden, a local mill owner.

In 1847 Joe married Eliza, a widow, who was born in Lingards near Slaithwaite: she was 36 years old and he was 39. The ceremony took place in Almondbury Church. Eliza already had a son from a previous marriage, John Bottomley, who had been born in Meltham in 1842. After his mother's marriage to Joe he adopted the Perkin name. Joe and Eliza had three sons; the eldest was born in March 1848 in Meltham Mills and was named Mendelssohn (an appropriate name for a music lover). William Wood was born in 1849 and Joe junior followed in 1856. Life could not have been easy for Joe at this time as he and his family were listed as paupers in the 1851 census returns.

His youngest child, Joe, was a free school pupil in 1866 at Cliffe School which was close to where the Perkins lived. This entitlement was funded for one year for a maximum of four children each year by the Collier Endowment Charity.

Joe's health deteriorated and his ability to sing declined so much so that in March 1857 the Holmfirth Choral Society held a benefit concert for him. However, by 1861 the family was more financially secure with the parents and the 2 eldest children working in the wool trade. Joe was a sorter, Eliza was a burler and the 2 children were wool piecers. Joe junior became a shoemaker but died at the age of 17 in 1873, his step-brother, John Bottomley, had already died in 1866.

Robert Ramsden, Joe's employer and himself a resident at Cliff, and a leading local churchman with connections with Holmfirth Parish Church for over 50 years, gave opportunities to Joe who was now concentrating on playing the violin and conducting. He became the conductor of the Holmfirth Choral Society and choirmaster at Meltham Parish Church where he was noted as being a severe disciplinarian. Between 1858 and 1861 Joe conducted a number of concerts, one of which was attended by Mrs Sunderland who instigated a music competition which endures in her name to the present day. Audiences in Holmfirth tended to be larger than those in Meltham. The music played included Handel's "Messiah", Haydn's "Creation" and at the funeral concert for his friend C.S. Floyd the philanthropist and local benefactor Joe's own arrangement for organ from the Book of Job was included. Joe was also involved in the funeral concert for Thomas Kaye, a local legendary huntsman.

Joe's stern character was evident in his daily life too, where he was said to be short-tempered and impatient. He was a tall man with black hair who walked with the aid of a stick because of a disability. He would brandish this stick when walking to a local well for water if children taunted him. The reminiscences of George Sykes as printed in the Holmfirth Express in 1914 give more insight into the character of Joe because they both lived at Cliff.

Joe combined his love of music with his enjoyment of alcohol. With his two friends, John Bailey, a violinist, and Henry Pogson, an ophicleide (similar to a present day tuba) player, he often played in public houses. John Bailey is probably the man who was arrested and charged with being drunk and disorderly in Victoria Street, Holmfirth in January 1859. Bailey denied the charge in court and Joe Perkin, acting as a witness, confirmed that Bailey had been sober all evening. Unfortunately Joe had not been with him all the time and Bailey was found guilty and fined 14 shillings.



Joe is in the centre, John is on the left and Henry is on the right

C.S. Floyd, the president of Holmfirth Choral Society, asked Joe to arrange the well known words of a poem and an equally well known tune to form “Pratty Flowers” into the version which is played and sung to this day. Joe never claimed to have been the original composer, rather he was the arranger of the piece. It was published in 1857 and was said to be the joint work of Joe and his friend Henry Pogson who reportedly said to Joe: “you can have all the glory, I am content to be of service”. Pratty Flowers is otherwise known as the Holmfirth Anthem.

Joe did compose several original songs amongst which were:

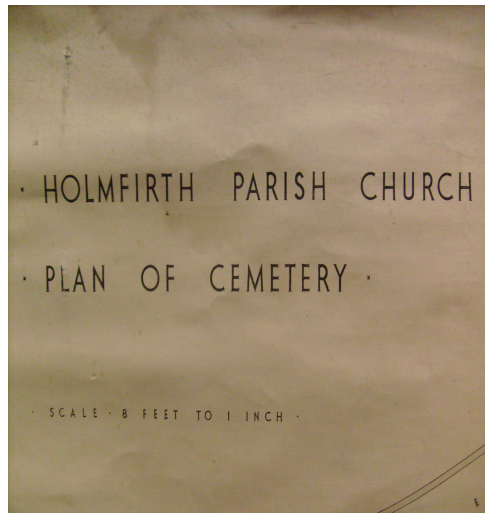
“Merry mountain child” for Charles Kaye, alto singer and son of Thomas Kaye – the famed local huntsman.

“O where is the land of the brave and free?”

“Hope brothers, hope”

and “The Holmfirth flood”.

Joe Perkin died in 1868 aged 59 and was buried in the cemetery on Cemetery Road, Holmfirth. In the same plot are 2 of his sons, a grand-daughter and his wife, Eliza. The headstone was described as lancet-shaped. The position of the plot can be determined from the burial book and cemetery plan which is kept in Holmfirth Parish Church.



		E. B. E.
93.	94.	95.
M. PERKINS	J. PERKINS	J. R. A.
3.	4.	J. W. N.
W. C. L. O. U. G. H.		5.
13.	14.	H. A. A. S.
W. C. L. O. U. G. H.		15.
23.	24.	25.
W. C. L. O. U. G. H.		

Because the plot was at one of the lowest points in the cemetery, the grave is now covered with earth which has slipped down the hillside and all that can be seen is the top of the headstone. A little gentle digging at the spot where a stone in the ground was seen revealed the actual headstone. This was confirmed by the shape and date on the headstone.



These are the initials and date of death of John Bottomley Perkin, Eliza's son by her first marriage.

Eliza outlived her husband by 35 years: she was quite a character and was often seen smoking her pipe in public places. She continued to live in Cliffe for some time but by 1891 she had moved with her grand-daughter, Everelder (Mendelssohn's daughter) into an almshouse on Station Road, Holmfirth and, finally, by 1901 became an inmate at the Deanhouse Workhouse. She died aged 91 in April 1903.



Pipe smoking Eliza

Mendelssohn, Joe's eldest son, gave up working in the textile industry and trained as an engineer. He married Eliza Ann Armitage but she died, probably when giving birth to their second child. In the census of 1891 he was listed as a professor of music and he travelled around the Holme Valley playing his violin. Mendelssohn died in 1911 in The Deanhouse Workhouse at Deanhouse between Netherthong and Honley. Aged 63. William's son (Joe's grandson) was named George Frederick perhaps after Handel. A direct descendant of Joe Perkin, through Mendelssohn and his daughter Everelder, was Colin Battye who continued the family's musical tradition by playing the tuba in Hade Edge Brass Band. He lived with his mother in Cliffe in the 1960s.

Meanwhile the Holme Valley tradition of community singing of Pratty Flowers carries on to this day.

Sources: Census records

Huddersfield Chronicles and Holmfirth Express newspapers

Ahier Chronicles

Personal anecdotes

Holmfirth Parish Church records